

# **"If we do not worship God, we will worship idols"**

Homily of Pope Francis at Holy Mass for the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord.

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The Evangelist Matthew tells us that the Magi, when they came to Bethlehem, “saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him” (*Mt 2:11*). Worshiping the Lord is not easy; it does not just happen. It requires a

certain spiritual maturity and is the fruit of an at times lengthy interior journey. Worshiping God is not something we do spontaneously. True, human beings have a need to worship, but we can risk missing the goal. Indeed, if we do not worship God, we will worship idols – there is no middle way, it is either God or idols; or, to use the words of a French writer: “Whoever does not worship God, worships the devil” (Léon Bloy) – and instead of becoming believers, we will become idolaters. It is just like that, *aut aut*.

In our day, it is particularly necessary for us, both as individuals and as communities, to devote more time to worship. We need to learn ever better how to contemplate the Lord. We have somewhat lost the meaning of the prayer of adoration, so we must take it up again, both in our communities and in our own spiritual life. Today, then, let us learn

a few useful lessons from the Magi. Like them, we want to fall down and worship the Lord. To worship him seriously, not as Herod said: “Let me know where the place is and I will go to worship him”. No, that worship is not good. Ours must be serious!

The Liturgy of the Word offers us three phrases that can help us to understand more fully what it means to be worshipers of the Lord. They are: “to lift up our eyes”, “to set out on a journey” and “to see”. These three phrases can help us to understand what it means to be a worshiper of the Lord.

The first phrase, *to lift up our eyes*, comes to us from the prophet Isaiah. To the community of Jerusalem, recently returned from exile and disheartened by great challenges and hardships, the prophet addresses these powerful words of encouragement: “Lift up your eyes

and look around" (60:4). He urges them to lay aside their weariness and complaints, to escape the bottleneck of a narrow way of seeing things, to cast off the dictatorship of the self, the constant temptation to withdraw into ourselves and our own concerns. To worship the Lord, we first have to "lift up our eyes". In other words, not to let ourselves be imprisoned by those imaginary spectres that stifle hope, not to make our problems and difficulties the centre of our lives. This does not mean denying reality, or deluding ourselves into thinking that all is well. On the contrary, it is a matter of viewing problems and anxieties in a new way, knowing that the Lord is aware of our troubles, attentive to our prayers and not indifferent to the tears we shed.

This way of seeing things, which despite everything continues to trust in the Lord, gives rise to filial

gratitude. When this happens, our hearts become open to worship. On the other hand, when we focus exclusively on problems, and refuse to lift up our eyes to God, fear and confusion creep into our hearts, giving rise to anger, bewilderment, anxiety and depression. Then it becomes difficult to worship the Lord. Once this happens, we need to find the courage to break out of the circle of our foregone conclusions and to recognize that reality is much greater than we imagine. *Lift up your eyes, look around and see.* The Lord asks us first to trust in him, because he truly cares for everyone. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he provide for us? (cf. *Lk 12:28*). If we lift up our eyes to the Lord, and consider all things in his light, we will see that he never abandons us. The Word became flesh (cf. *Jn 1:14*)

and remains with us always, for all time (cf. *Mt* 28:20). Always.

When we lift up our eyes to God, life's problems do not go away, no; instead we feel certain that the Lord grants us the strength to deal with them. The first step towards an attitude of worship, then, is to "lift up our eyes". Our worship is that of disciples who have found in God a new and unexpected joy. Worldly joy is based on wealth, success or similar things, always with ourselves at the centre. The joy of Christ's disciples, on the other hand, is based on the fidelity of God, whose promises never fail, whatever the crises we may face. Filial gratitude and joy awaken within us a desire to worship the Lord, who remains ever faithful and never abandons us.

The second helpful phrase is *to set out on a journey*. Before they could worship the Child in Bethlehem, the

Magi had to undertake a lengthy journey. Matthew tells us that in those days “wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying: ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him’” (*Mt 2:1-2*). A journey always involves a transformation, a change. After a journey, we are no longer the same. There is always something new about those who have made a journey: they have learned new things, encountered new people and situations, and found inner strength amid the hardships and risks they met along the way. No one worships the Lord without first experiencing the interior growth that comes from embarking on a journey.

We become worshipers of the Lord through a gradual process. Experience teaches us, for example, that at fifty we worship differently than we did at thirty. Those who let

themselves be shaped by grace usually improve with time: on the outside, we grow older – so Saint Paul tells us – while our inner nature is being renewed each day (cf. *2 Cor 4:16*), as we grow in our understanding of how best to worship the Lord. From this point of view, our failures, crises and mistakes can become learning experiences: often they can help us to be more aware that the Lord alone is worthy of our worship, for only he can satisfy our innermost desire for life and eternity. With the passage of time, life's trials and difficulties – experienced in faith – help to purify our hearts, making them humbler and thus more and more open to God. Even our sins, the awareness of being sinners, of experiencing such bad things. “But I did this... I did...”: if you approach it with faith and repentance, with contrition, it will help you to grow. Paul says that everything can help us to grow

spiritually, to encounter Jesus, even our sins. And Saint Thomas adds: “*etiam mortalia*”, even the bad sins, the worst. But if you respond with repentance it will help you on this journey towards encountering the Lord and to worship him better.

Like the Magi, we too must allow ourselves to learn from the journey of life, marked by the inevitable inconveniences of travel. We cannot let our weariness, our falls and our failings discourage us. Instead, by humbly acknowledging them, we should make them opportunities to progress towards the Lord Jesus. Life is not about showing off our abilities, but a journey towards the One who loves us. We are not to show off our virtues in every step of our life; rather, with humility we should journey towards the Lord. By keeping our gaze fixed on the Lord, we will find the strength needed to persevere with renewed joy.

And so we come to the third phrase: *to see. To lift up our eyes; to set out on a journey; to see.* The Evangelist tells us that, “going into the house they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him” (*Mt 2:10-11*). Worshiping was an act of homage reserved for sovereigns and high dignitaries. The Magi worshiped the One they knew was the king of the Jews (cf. *Mt 2:2*). But what did they actually see? They saw a poor child and his mother. Yet these wise men from far-off lands were able to look beyond those lowly surroundings and recognize in that Child a royal presence. They were able to “see” beyond appearances. Falling to their knees before the Babe of Bethlehem, they expressed a worship that was above all interior: the opening of the treasures they had brought as gifts symbolized the offering of their own hearts.

To worship the Lord we need to “see” beyond the veil of things visible, which often prove deceptive. Herod and the leading citizens of Jerusalem represent a worldliness enslaved to appearances and immediate attractions. They see, yet they cannot see. It is not that they do not believe, no; it is that they do not know how to see because they are slaves to appearances and seek what is attractive. They value only the sensational, the things that capture the attention of the masses. In the Magi, however, we see a very different approach, one we can define as *theological realism* – a very “high” word, yet helpful – a way of perceiving the objective reality of things and leads to the realization that God shuns all ostentation. The Lord is in humility, he is like that humble child, who shuns that ostentation which is precisely the product of worldliness. A way of “seeing” that transcends the visible

and makes it possible for us to worship the Lord who is often hidden in everyday situations, in the poor and those on the fringes. A way of seeing things that is not impressed by sound and fury, but seeks in every situation the things that truly matter, and that seeks the Lord. With Saint Paul, then, let us “look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (*2 Cor 4:18*).

May the Lord Jesus make us true worshipers, capable of showing by our lives his loving plan for all humanity. Let us ask for the grace for each of us and for the whole Church, to learn to worship, to continue to worship, to exercise this prayer of adoration often, because only God is to be adored.

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